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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the National Center for Study Adult Learning Literacy's (NCSALL's) Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network was examined by reviewing how, from 1997 to 2001, adult basic education teachers from 14 states served as liaisons between practitioners in their states and the NCSALL by engaging in the following activities: sharing information about NCSALL studies; identifying programs to serve as research sites; conducting their own research; and organizing research-based professional development activities. Key findings were as follows: (1) connecting practitioners and researchers has a positive impact on practitioners, practice, researchers, and research; (2) effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific strategies, including practitioner involvement in research and dissemination, a commitment to collaboration, the right practitioner leaders, and face-to-face meetings; and (3) effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific supports for practitioner leaders, local practitioners, program directors, and state staff. The following were among the study recommendations: (1) provide funding for professional development activities that help practitioners understand and use research; (2) assist states new to research-based professional development; (3) develop activities that help policymakers understand and use research; (4) involve practitioners as both participants and researchers; and (5) provide funding, technical assistance, and coordination to help states integrate research, practice, and policy activities into current systems. (MN)

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NCSALL Research Brief

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Connecting Practitioners and Researchers: An Evaluation of NCSALL's Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network

A NCSALL Research Brief

Cristine Smith • Mary Beth Bingman • Judy Hofer • Patsy Medina • Practitioner Leaders

Teachers need research that is relevant to their practice, with strategies and techniques they can use in their work. NCSALL's Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN) set out to create and support systematic partnerships between practitioners and university researchers to better connect research and practice, with the ultimate outcome of improved practice, policy, and services for adult learners.

At the heart of the PDRN were the Practitioner Leaders, adult basic education teachers from 14 states who served as liaisons between practitioners in their states and NCSALL. Between 1997 and 2001, Practitioner Leaders shared information about NCSALL studies; identified programs to serve as research sites; conducted their own research on topics related to NCSALL research; helped other practitioners in their states research similar topics; and organized research-based professional development activities, such as study circles, to present NCSALL research results to practitioners and encourage use of new theories or recommended practices.

Findings

Several factors supported the PDRN's work and development: opportunities to meet face-to-face; the existence of PDRN Regional Coordinators; the Practitioner Leaders' dedication, enthusiasm, and collaboration; training in practitioner research; the PDRN's internal listserv; state support and funding; teachers' hunger for information and interaction; and the involvement of NCSALL researchers. Hindering factors were lack of clarity while the project evolved; lack of PDRN staff and Practitioner Leader time; Practitioner Leader and state staff turnover; lack of access to updated information about research projects; the limited involvement of some NCSALL researchers; and limited support for professional development in some states.

We concluded that the PDRN's impact was strongest on those most closely involved in its work, including the Practitioner Leaders and PDRN Coordinators. Practitioners and students with whom the Practitioner Leaders worked directly felt the next-strongest impact, followed by practitioners who participated in PDRN-sponsored study circles and practitioner research. Greater impact might have been achieved by increasing the Practitioner Leaders' time devoted to PDRN work, the duration and number of study circles, the number of practitioners involved in research, and more involvement of NCSALL researchers and state staff in training sessions and meetings with practitioners. These activities would have required more funding for the PDRN as well as more state funding to support practitioner research and paid professional development.

Key Findings

- Connecting practitioners and researchers has a positive impact on practitioners and practice, and on researchers and research.
- Effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific strategies, including practitioner involvement in research and dissemination; a commitment to collaboration; the right Practitioner Leaders; and face-to-face meetings.
- Effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific supports for Practitioner Leaders, local practitioners, program directors, and state staff.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

- Provide funding for professional development activities that help practitioners understand and use research.
- Assist states new to research-based professional development.
- Develop activities that help policymakers understand and use research.
- Involve practitioners as both participants and researchers.
- Provide funding, technical assistance, and coordination to help states integrate research, practice, and policy activities into current systems.

Lessons Learned

The PDRN experience should inform a larger effort in our field to help teachers and policymakers learn how to integrate information about "what works" according to research with "what works" according to their colleagues and their own experience. Perhaps the most important lesson we learned through the PDRN is that practitioners are interested in research. Involvement with research expands practitioners' views of the adult literacy field and their role in it. Involvement of practitioners in research design, implementation, and analysis, in turn, improves the quality and usefulness of the research.

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Effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific strategies, including the following:

- Involving practitioners in research and its dissemination so they can become research consumers
- Ensuring researchers and practitioners work collaboratively to strengthen connections between practice and research
- Selecting the right Practitioner Leaders, preferably with prior research experience or a leadership role within their state, as well as a stable job in and long-term commitment to the field
- Holding face-to-face meetings between network members (researchers, Practitioner Leaders, and coordinators)

Effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific supports for Practitioner Leaders, local practitioners, program directors, and state staff. For Practitioner Leaders, these supports include:

- Assistance and training from their state and/or from a national organization such as NCSALL to help them think about not only their PDRN work, but also what they need to do the job well and grow
- Adequate, funded time built into their jobs for research, professional development, and outreach
- Clear roles and responsibilities

For local practitioners, these supports include:

- Activities, such as study circles and practitioner research, that involve them in their own research and with other researchers' work, combined with paid staff release time and sustained opportunities to engage in these activities
- A practitioner in the role of "leader" who helps them connect with research and researchers
- State funding and a designated staff person to manage research and practice work

For local program directors and state staff, states need to provide a means to develop an understanding of and systems for practitioner research and research-based professional development.

Practice, Policy, and Research Recommendations

The overall implication of the PDRN's work is that connecting researchers and practitioners in the field of adult learning and literacy will require a national system, which we believe should connect policy and research as well. This system should operate in every state, involve all adult literacy research and researchers, and include both professional development and policy-setting activities in each state. Such a system can ensure that research findings inform practice and that research studies are based on practice, thereby maximizing the investment of research funding. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- Provide funding for professional development activities that help practitioners understand and use research.
- Offer technical assistance to states in which delivery of research-based professional development is new.
- Develop activities, such as policy problem-solving seminars, that help policymakers understand and use research.
- Involve practitioners as both participants and leaders: as co-researchers and investigators with adult literacy researchers at both the national and state levels. Provide structures to allow practitioners and researchers to interact in sustained, face-to-face ways.
- Provide funding at the state, national, and research study level, as well as technical assistance and coordination, so that states can integrate research, practice, and policy activities into their current systems to improve service delivery.

If a system connecting practice, policy, and research is to work effectively, it can't only be a process of research *to* practice; research and its funding should also be based on the needs in the field. There must be a way for practitioners and policymakers to provide input into national-level research agenda setting, funding, and design. We would anticipate two positive results: Research would more likely address the real needs of those working in adult literacy at the grassroots level, and practitioners and policymakers would be more receptive to the research because they were more involved in advocating for it. In short, practitioners and policymakers would become active research consumers.

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